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## God in Government: The Influence of Religion in the Eisenhower, Reagan, and George W. Bush Administrations

Megan L. Baumgardner

Eastern Kentucky University, [Megan\\_baumgardner9@mymail.eku.edu](mailto:Megan_baumgardner9@mymail.eku.edu)

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# GOD IN GOVERNMENT

God in Government: The Influence of Religion in the Eisenhower, Reagan, and  
George W. Bush Administrations

Honors Thesis  
Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the  
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Spring 2021

By  
Megan Baumgardner

Faculty Mentor  
Dr. Anne Cizmar  
Department of Government

God in Government: The Influence of Religion in the Eisenhower, Reagan, and  
George W. Bush Administrations

Megan Baumgardner

Faculty Mentor Dr. Anne Cizmar of the Department of Government

This research seeks to examine the interconnected nature of religion and politics in the United States through the lens of the influence of the political elite. This relationship, though seemingly contradictory to the separation of church and state on which the U.S. was built, is especially apparent in how political leaders have projected their political goals through religious rhetoric. The use of religious rhetoric in the inaugural and state of the union addresses of United States presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush was analyzed for how the frequency of such rhetoric correlated to the purpose of its use in the speech. Inaugural addresses and state of the union addresses were chosen for how they allow presidents to communicate directly to the American people in a format repeated by each administration. Data was collected from transcripts of each speech and calculated based on the total spoken terms which fell into a category determined to be religious. These categories included spiritual based rhetoric, religious overtones rhetoric, and Christian specific rhetoric. The frequency of terms in each category was found to correlate to the speakers' intention behind the speech. This data represents how the political elite are able to project their personal or political relationship with religion onto the American people through their rhetoric. In each president examined, a correlation could be determined between the type of religious rhetoric they employed, and the intention of their speech.

*Keywords and phrases:* religion, Christianity, presidency, Inaugural Addresses, State of the Union Addresses

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## **Introduction**

The United States of America was built on the fundamental principles of freedom and liberty, largely involving the freedom both from and to religion. Given this right, granted by the very first amendment of the United States (U.S.) Constitution, the nation became a melting pot of several religions and ideologies. The United States, “in large part due to religious liberty available in this nation, had the most diverse religious landscape in the world” (Usman, 2007). Considering this fact, it is surprising to see how entrenched the literary and symbolic rhetoric of the United States has become. From the introduction of the phrase “In God We Trust,” into prominent U.S. symbols including currency, state mottos, and even state license plates, to the religious elements seen in several federal events and ceremonies, the invocation and prayer at a presidential inauguration for example, specifically Christian religious symbols have infiltrated everyday life for American citizens.

Despite a wide array of religions and ideologies present in modern America, a vast majority of religious rhetoric utilized by the federal government falls under Christian beliefs and symbols. This phenomenon influences everyday policy decisions, directly affecting millions of Americans. The study of the influence of religion on American politics has several practical implications. Policy created by the federal government has a multitude of effects on the average American’s way of life, understanding what factors impact and effect these policies is vital in making informed choices at the ballot box. For many, the knowledge the political leaders are heavily involved with Christian Right leaders may sway them to consider other candidates, with the knowledge that religion will become a determining source of policy decisions. Looking at more recent politics, the incorporation of a candidate's stance on moral issues based on their

religious beliefs has had a great impact on social issues. In the last ten years, debates on policy regarding LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, and immigration policy have been grounded in arguments reflecting the central question of how much influence religion should have on policy. This is not a new phenomenon however, the pull between civil religion of the masses and the use of religion by the political elite has been occurring for decades.

Presidents can permanently alter the line between political rhetoric and religious rhetoric in the U.S. Influenced not only by the international political stage they enter upon inauguration, but also by the mass beliefs of their time, a president can present a unique dynamic between religion and political impact. This is an area of concern as of late, with availability of recent technology, politicians have easier access to disseminating ideas to their constituents. This, compounded with an ever-growing feeling of polarization on moral policy issues, begs the question of how religion may be used as a tool of conformity or loyalty for politicians. The ease for which religious rhetoric can be projected to U.S. citizens now calls for a deeper evaluation of how this form of rhetoric can be method of influencing voters to support candidates or policies.

Beyond this, religious rhetoric has been intertwined with the purpose of the presidency itself, as a method of unifying or comforting the nation in times of domestic or international unrest, as the nation seemingly becomes more polarized and international politics have become strained over policies related to issues from climate change to nuclear proliferation. Research analyzing how religion is used and in what ways, by political elite, can better shape how such issues are being handled. This thesis will further demonstrate how religion was used in the presidencies of Dwight D. Eisenhower from 1953-1961, Ronald Reagan from 1981-1989, and George W. Bush 2001-2009 to permanently alter common US rhetoric, give moral ground to policy reform, and influence international relations. Each of these factors will be analyzed by

examining first the global and domestic context combined with each President's personal relation with religion along with how this influenced the unique ways in which we see religion used by each of these three presidents.

### **History and Background of the Use of Religious Speech in U.S. Politics**

Acknowledging the founding fathers' dedication to break free from the close ties between religion and politics, ironically presents an intertwined philosophy of governance and religion. It has been argued that any political society is based in religion and the United States is not excluded from that notion. The inclusion of the Establishment Clause in the first amendment, preventing the federal government from establishing a national religion or unduly favoring one religion over another, was a response to the religious persecution faced by early immigrants to America, however, has not totally prevented the intrusion of religion into the heart of politics.

In the article, "The Priestly Functions of the Presidency: A Discussion of the Literature on Civil Religion and its Implications for the Study of Presidential Leadership," Fairbanks expands upon the pre-existing complexity behind the role of the U.S. presidency, with respect to the institution's relation with religion. Fairbanks argues that any political society is based on religion and the role of the president is not excluded from this relationship. Controversially, he goes as far as to claim that social solidarity is dependent upon a common religion by which to define the morals of society. He pulls from literature by Robert Bellah, the originator of the definition for American civil religion, to contend that civil religion provides "the basic symbols out of which ideology can be built" (Fairbanks, 1981, 215). Fairbanks argues that the study of civil religion is of utmost importance for understanding the religious dimensions of political leadership. He emphasized the validity of studying the "priestly role" of political leadership, a

topic that he claims has been widely neglected by his fellow political scientists. Fairbanks proposes further research questions which will be touched on in greater detail in upcoming research, including “to what extent should the United States be considered a religious society,” and “how is political leadership affected by the consensus in support of basic values and what can leaders do to promote greater consensus?” (Fairbanks, 1981, 229). The question of how much the U.S. should be considered a religious society directly correlates to the religious behavior and rhetoric of its most prominent leaders.

The culture of the United States government has remained entrenched in religion, even as it has modernized and as the citizens have strayed further from religion playing a part of their everyday lives. Recent research has detailed Americans’ digression from religious involvement as correlated with higher than ever percentages of the population receiving higher education degrees (Smith, 2010). This presents a unique contradiction between the presumed attitude of the political complex and that of the growing majority of citizens.

In attempt to reframe and potentially answer some of these questions laid out by Fairbanks, it is important to examine the relationship between American values based in religion, how these become reflected in policy, and how political leaders support or argue against this policy, along with the promotion of religion from both a symbolic and verbal standpoint. It is also important to consider how the promotion of political leaders has played into the political trends of the past few decades. Primarily, the discussion of the politicization of religious fundamentalists plays directly into how political elites choose to use the masses’ beliefs to further policy. Specifically, the alignment of the Republican party with fundamentalist values has become increasingly more prevalent since the early 1980s.



The article, "Religious Outlook, Culture War Politics, and Antipathy Toward Christian Fundamentalists" by Bolce and de Maio expands upon how this emerging relationship between fundamentalist morals and Republican party platforms may affect the hostility toward this group, it contributes to the question of how political elites may take the polarization of party platforms to shape and from the relationship of American policy through religious based moral decisions. Bolce and De Maio pulled from the American National Election Surveys from 1988, 1992, and 1996 which specifically addressed the topic of Christian fundamentalists, having respondents rate their feelings toward them on a temperature-based scale. However, this data does present a few issues within its operationalizing of a Christian fundamentalist compared to a Christian non-fundamentalist.

Nevertheless, the analyses conducted worked with a limited view that fundamentalists are those who hold the belief that "the Bible is God's word and all that it says is true" (Bolce and De Maio, 1999, 35). Based on the means thermometer analyzing hostility for religious groups, the respondents had the strongest feelings for Christian fundamentalists when compared to other religious groups. With this in mind, the analysis found that what pits fundamentalists against non-fundamentalists is ultimately their alignment on controversial policy debates. This polarization of the American people aligning with major morally based policy decisions is a trend that is becoming ever more present. To trace back how religion and politics intertwined requires both an understanding of religion and its role in party affiliation along with how that deepens the cleavage in political ideologies. Whether this shapes how presidential administrations make decisions on controversial policies or if those decisions play into the already existing ideologies is a question still up for debate.

**Dwight D. Eisenhower**

Eisenhower's presidency introduced an intimate relationship between American politics and religion. Even in his inaugural address Eisenhower ended with a prayer and maintained an open religious rhetoric throughout his time in office. In the article, "The Spiritual Factor: Eisenhower, Religion, and Foreign Policy" the authors go as far as to claim, "the eight-year Eisenhower presidency was unprecedented in American history for its introduction of religious symbols into political life" (Gunn and Slighoua, 2011, 41). What is interesting about this intimate relationship between Eisenhower's administration and religion, was that he was the first, and remains the only, president to be baptized while in office.

Dwight D. Eisenhower was baptized in office in 1953, only ten days after his presidential inauguration. He was subsequently welcomed into the "National Presbyterian Church by the Rev. Edward Elson" (Hitchcock, 2018). Though he adopted a new and inherently more personal relationship with religion while in office, it had played a major part in his life growing up. As a child, he was a part of the River Brethren church and his family was very involved in the congregation. Just prior to his presidential election win, Eisenhower met famed pastor, Reverend Billy Graham, and the two began a steady and regular correspondence, which would last throughout Eisenhower's presidency. This relationship was only enhanced by the idea that the modern troubles of the nation, the beginnings of the cold war and the war on communism, were in fact a part of a greater battle on sin. Both Graham and Eisenhower viewed religion as the truest and most valuable weapon America had against communist ideas and oppression. It was in 1953, at the beginning of Eisenhower's presidency, that the Nuclear Arms Race was at its height. From March 17th to June 4th of 1953, the Nevada nuclear site tested 11 explosions of atomic bombs (Cold War Timeline). This level of nuclear activity along with the increased pressure and

fear surrounding potential attacks from the Soviet Union (USSR) left citizens feeling vulnerable. Graham and Eisenhower's thought that religion would serve to unify and potentially comfort U.S. citizens as they presented a united front against communism was a vital part of understanding why this administration implemented the symbolically religious phrases and traditions into American policy.

Eisenhower introduced several religious symbols and institutions during his time in office. During his first year in office, 1953, Eisenhower began what is now known as the National Prayer Breakfast. This is an annual congregation of political, social, and business elite gathering in prayer and fellowship. The annual gathering has grown from the time of the Eisenhower administration of an attendance of 400 to one of almost 4,000 (Winston, 2017). The now longstanding tradition is still considered to be one of the closest public displays of religious behavior by the political elite. Eisenhower's religious legacy also lives on through specific policies implemented under his administration. Most notably perhaps, he championed the addition of the phrase "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance, as well as the passage of the law incorporating the phrase "In God We Trust" onto currency.

Influenced by Scottish Reverend George M. Doherty, Eisenhower was first enticed to add "Under God" at a sermon given by Rev. Doherty in 1954. That very week bills were introduced to make the change, and the official act to alter the Pledge of Allegiance was signed into law on June 14, 1954, Flag Day (Siegel, 2018). This influential piece of legislation still stands today, despite much controversy. Another, longstanding piece of religious legislation was the inclusion of "In God We Trust" onto currency and other American symbols. In 1956, just two years after the addition of "Under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance, Eisenhower signed a law establishing "In God We Trust" as the official national motto. This law also declared that all American paper

currency should be printed with the phrase, which had already been engraved on American coins since the Civil War. The addition of these two phrases, remain as a prevalent reminder of the United States' intertwined relationship with religion. Given the historical context of Cold War at the time of these laws, it further supports the analysis that Eisenhower believed that religion would unify the nation against communist ideas.

### **Ronald Reagan: Personal and Political Relationship with Religion**

With his background as an actor, it can be surprising to learn that former President Ronald Reagan was brought up in the Disciples of Christ, a religiously inclusive faith which inspired his close ties to faith while in office both as Governor of California in the 1960s and as President from 1981-1989. However, compared to Eisenhower's overt personal relationship with his faith, Reagan was much more casual with his religious displays. Reagan was rarely seen leaving the White House to attend Sunday service and had a relatively related view of what religion could restrict. It is then surprising, that he has come to be known as a symbol of religious politics. At the time, his administration was seen as a revival of the Christian right linking morally conservative ideology to political policy.

The domestic political theater in which Reagan came to office was rife with dispute over social policies. The previous decade had seen progressive decisions regarding policies which conservative America considered to be taking an immoral stance. For instance, one of the most controversial Supreme Court decisions was made in *Roe v. Wade*. In 1973, the courts ruled to recognize a woman's right to terminate her pregnancy by abortion. This decision sparked backlash specifically from the Christian right, a group which played a key role in Reagan's presidential campaign success.

In the article “Religion and Political Behavior in the United States” by Geoffrey Layman, he expands upon the hypothesis that religious orthodoxy has the greatest growing impact on American political behavior over other traditional religious belief systems. He analyzed several variables including party identification, doctrinal orthodoxy, religious commitment, and presidential vote. Layman compiled a thorough snapshot of the voting population and their political and religious standing from 1980-1994. In doing so, his results were consistent with current findings that there is a positive correlation between high levels of religious commitment and likelihood of voting Republican in a major American election. With the debate over morality-based politics heating up leading up to Reagan’s election, it is clear that an effective campaign strategy would be to emphasize politics and conservative morals in order to win over the religious right or moral majority.

In the article “Ronald Reagan and the Splintering of the Christian Right,” David John Marley argues that while the 1980s was a period of growth for the Christian Right movement, the man they credit this growth to, Ronald Reagan, did very little to influence policy regarding the issues they emphasize most. Because of this misconception regarding the influence Reagan had on the policies valued by the Christian Right, Marley instead expands on other effects of the Reagan presidency on the Christian Right. Initially, it was Reagan’s campaign promises of securing office positions for evangelicals and supporting prayer in school which drew the organization, the Moral Majority to his side. It was during this campaign that Reagan and famed Christian Right leader Jerry Falwell began regular correspondence. Falwell was a prominent fundamentalist who, up until the court’s ruling on *Roe v. Wade*, believed that politics and religion should remain separate. This changed after the monumental *Roe v. Wade* decision granting the right to abortion be protected under the law. By 1979, he was working closely with

Republican political leadership to cofound the Moral Majority. Falwell said about this organization, “‘I was convinced that there was a moral majority out there among those more than 200 million Americans sufficient in number to turn back the flood tide of moral permissiveness, family breakdown and general capitulation to evil and to foreign policies such as Marxism-Leninism’” (PBS, 2010). He used this organization and its religious roots to rally constituents to vote in favor of republican policies, which would be very important in the upcoming election at the time for Reagan.

It was Falwell’s influence that kept the Moral Majority in the spotlight as conservative Republicans remained concerned over what social issue decisions may be brought to the forefront, however none ever did; his presidency largely focused on economic rather than social issues. In this way, Marley contends that Ronald Reagan’s ties to the Christian Right had very little impact from a policy standpoint. By analyzing the relationships that connected the movement to this presidency, both with Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, Marley assesses the impact each had on the other. Looking primarily at personal written correspondence between the two religious leaders and the president, Marley expands upon what was known about these relationships.

He goes as far as to comment that “the Christian Right was not nearly as important to Ronald Reagan as he was to them” (Marley, 2006, 866). While his close connection to this group legitimized them as a politically influential movement, they accomplished very little during Reagan’s time in office. The way in which Reagan intertwined religion with his administration was much different from Eisenhower’s policy implementation. Reagan was first and foremost a public figure, and he used his visibility to speak openly about religion frequently. In one such speech, discussing the foundation of the nation as rooted in religion, Reagan said,

“Religion played not only a strong role in our national life; it played a positive role. The abolitionist movement was at heart a moral and religious movement; so was the modern civil rights struggle. And throughout this time, the state was tolerant of religious belief, expression, and practice. Society, too, was tolerant,” (Kengor, 2014, pp.11).

While religious, most specifically Christian, organizations and leaders attached themselves to Reagan throughout his presidency, the nation saw very little in terms of religious or moral policy passed during this time. The way in which Reagan was able to keep religious voters engaged appears to be limited to his willingness to speak openly with religious rhetoric. His use of religious rhetoric kept conservative voters loyal to him between his presidential elections, and after his second inauguration, this type of speech becomes more limited as it is no longer a necessity for him to hold a future office. After his second election, Reagan’s use of religious rhetoric reduces and focuses on occasional use for policy support, but this was not as common as it was prior to 1984.

### **George W. Bush: Personal and Political Relationship with Religion**

George W. Bush did not grow up with a particularly personal relationship to religion, but similar to Eisenhower, he sought out a more personal relationship with religion later in life. Although he attended an Episcopalian Church with his family, it was not until well into adulthood that Bush began to take religion more seriously. According to family friend Doug Wead, it was Bush’s struggle with alcohol which pushed him to become more devoted to his faith after a meeting with Billy Graham, religious mentor to Eisenhower. This was in the late 1980s, and by the time he was elected as governor of Texas in 1994, Bush was a devout Christian with fundamental and evangelical views. He was known to read from the Bible every

morning during his time as governor and began to incorporate his religious and moral beliefs to his conservative political agenda.

The 2000 presidential campaign, which would end in George W. Bush's win has been noted for being particularly tied to religious language along the campaign trail. This was coming off of the scandalous two terms of former President Bill Clinton, making the candidate's personal integrity and moral background of utmost importance for the 2000 election. In the first presidential debate, a question was posed asking for the candidates to name the philosopher who has most influenced them. "Bush responded: 'Christ, because he changed my heart'... 'When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as the savior, it changes your heart'" (Conkle, 2002). This was just one example of Bush's appeal to his conversion to evangelical Christianity as a means of attracting Republican and Christian right voters.

In the article "The Christian Right Thesis: Explaining Longitudinal Change in Participation among Evangelical Christians," the authors expand upon existing literature regarding the alignment of Republicans and the Christian Right by examining the possible cause of this phenomenon. They ask the question of whether Republican electoral success is "due to having mobilized Evangelicals that would not have participated otherwise" (Ryan and Povtak, 2010). This is an area of study that has not been explored in depth, leaving gaps in information surrounding the electoral participation of varying religious groups. Specifically, the authors intend to investigate the turnout of Evangelical voters in the 2000 and 2004 election compared to previous elections and how this contributed to George W. Bush's success in the 2004 election because of how his campaign appealed to their specialized Republican platforms. A key example of this could be seen with the gay marriage bans laid out by Bush stimulating Evangelical voter support.



Listening to him speak openly about his faith and his love for Christ resonated with many conservatives while simultaneously annexing more secular and liberal voters. Finally, the authors argue the importance of the “God gap” in elections. This phenomenon is the boost candidates can achieve by focusing on coalitions defined “by a voter’s level of religiosity and religious tradition” (Dulk and Rozell, 2011, 77). It’s these religious coalitions that influenced much of Bush’s governing style especially after 9/11 when foreign affairs were pushed to the forefront of American politics. This not only affected both his campaigns, but his policy positions while in office as well. On the home front, the Bush administration had inherited the 1996 Welfare Reform Act and added the Charitable Choice Provision. This “provision allows churches, synagogues, and other ‘faith-based’ religious organizations to compete for federal grant money” (Conkle, 2002, 247). This piece of legislation was considered to have the potential to be extremely influential. The financial dynamic of church-state relations had been separating, but this provision had the possibility to alter this entirely, intertwining the church financially with the government.

Bush’s use of religious rhetoric and reasoning for policy decisions did not always align him with conservatives, for example the authors point to his support for providing aid to Africa amidst their AIDS epidemic. This brings about the broader perspective of the global context of Bush’s faith. The authors claim that Bush saw faith as a necessary tool for strategizing on a global scale. Especially after the attacks on 9/11, the Bush administration leaned heavily on faith. This coincided with a shift on how religious Americans viewed foreign affairs. Further research by Dulk and Rozell ultimately aimed to prove that religion played a multifaceted role in George W. Bush’s presidency. From his own personal connection with his faith to a global response to a devastating terrorist attack, religion remained a consistent undertone to his time in office. This is

played out in both rhetoric and policy. An interesting fact to keep in mind from this article was the clarification that not all religious based policy is conservative. For example, the global human rights initiatives leaned toward more moderate and liberal platforms while also being justified by religious rhetoric.

### **Data and Methods**

The collection of data in this analysis was dependent upon the transcripts of the inaugural and state of the union addresses given by Eisenhower, Reagan, and George W. Bush during their time in office. Each of the former presidents served two terms, providing two inaugural addresses. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inaugural addresses are from 1953 and 1957, and the transcripts were gathered from The American Presidency Project and Yale Law School's Lillian Goldman Law Library respectively. He delivered nine State of the Union addresses from the years of 1953 to 1961.<sup>1</sup> President Ronald Reagan's inaugural addresses are from 1981 and 1985, the transcripts were gathered both from Yale Law School's Lillian Goldman Law Library. Reagan delivered seven State of the Union Addresses from the years 1982 to 1988.<sup>2</sup> President

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<sup>1</sup> 1953 retrieved from: <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/dwight-david-eisenhower/state-of-the-union-1953.php>  
 1954 retrieved from: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/eisenhower-state54/>  
 1955 retrieved from: <https://www.infoplease.com/primary-sources/government/presidential-speeches/state-union-address-dwight-d-eisenhower-january-6-1955>  
 1956 retrieved from: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/annual-message-the-congress-the-state-the-union-11>  
 1957 retrieved from: <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/dwight-david-eisenhower/state-of-the-union-1957.php>  
 1958 retrieved from: <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/dwight-david-eisenhower/state-of-the-union-1958.php>  
 1959 retrieved from: <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/dwight-david-eisenhower/state-of-the-union-1959.php>  
 1960 retrieved from: <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/dwight-david-eisenhower/state-of-the-union-1960.php>  
 1961 retrieved from: <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/dwight-david-eisenhower/state-of-the-union-1961.php>

<sup>2</sup> 1982 retrieved from: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-reporting-the-state-the-union-2>  
 1983 retrieved from: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-joint-session-congress-state-union>  
 1984 retrieved from: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-4>

George W. Bush inaugural addresses are from 2001 and 2005, the transcripts were gathered from The White House Archives and the article “President Bush’s Second Inaugural Address (NPR, 2005). President Bush also delivered seven State of the Union Addresses from the years 2002 to 2008.<sup>3</sup>

The research focused on the inaugural and state of the union addresses in order to maintain a consistent data collection among each of the three presidents. It was important to analyze speeches which were directed toward a general audience of the broad U.S. population. Each of the inaugural addresses were made before a live audience and were televised across the nation. The State of the Union addresses were delivered to a joint session before Congress and the Senate and made accessible to the U.S. population through radio transmission or were televised to a broad audience.

In order to analyze religious rhetoric utilized by each of the three former presidents during their two terms in office, the terminology which can be classified as religious must first be established. The overarching category of religious rhetoric was split into three narrower categories. These were spirituality-based rhetoric, religious overtones rhetoric, and Christian specific. The first, spirituality-based rhetoric, includes terms which appeal to abstract ideas

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1985 retrieved from: <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/128840/union4.pdf>

1986 retrieved from: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-joint-session-congress-state-union-1986>

1987 retrieved from: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-joint-session-congress-state-union-1987>

1988 retrieved from: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-joint-session-congress-state-union-1988>

<sup>3</sup> 2002 retrieved from: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

2003 retrieved from: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/bushtext\\_012803.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/bushtext_012803.html)

2004 retrieved from: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/transcripts/bushtext\\_012004.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/transcripts/bushtext_012004.html)

2005 retrieved from: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/transcripts/bushtext\\_020205.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/transcripts/bushtext_020205.html)

2006 retrieved from: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/stateoftheunion/2006/>

2007 retrieved from: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/stateoftheunion/2007/index.html>

2008 retrieved from: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/stateoftheunion/2008/index.html>

regarding the human spirit or soul. While these do not directly tie into a specific religious denomination, the terms included in this category pertain to an element of belief in a greater meaning or purpose. This category consisted of the words, comfort, eternity, evil, free/freedom, liberty, glory. The second, religious overtones rhetoric, begins to narrow in meaning, symbolizing a belief to a greater power. Each of the terms in this category relate to a prescription to religious ideology. Though it is not specified which religion or denomination this may be referring. The one exception in this category is the term Koran, referring to the Islamic sacred book. This was excluded from the final category, because the focus of the research was heavily influenced by Christianity, because of its religious weight however, it was included in the study under “religious overtones.” The category, religious overtones rhetoric, consisted of the words, amen, bless, creator, Koran, faith, holy, and peace. The final category, Christian specific rhetoric, contains terms which directly relate to the Christian faith. Because Christianity is the religious practiced by each of the presidents examined, and the research seeks to analyze how presidents utilize their own beliefs in office, this is the only specific religion which will be examined. The terms in the final category are, Bible, heaven, hell, and God.

The figure below contains the three categories separating religious rhetoric which appeared in the Inaugural Addresses and State of the Union Addresses given by Eisenhower, Reagan, and George W. Bush during each of their two terms in office. On the left is the category title as it will appear in the following tables. In the column on the right are the terms included in each category respectively.

**Table 1:** Religious Rhetoric as Defined by Spirituality Based Rhetoric, Religious Overtones Rhetoric, or Christian Specific Rhetoric

Spirituality Based Rhetoric	Comfort, Eternity, Evil, Free/Freedom, Liberty, Glory
Religious Overtones Rhetoric	Amen, Bless, Creator, Koran, Faith, Holy, Peace
Christian Specific Rhetoric	Bible, Heaven, Hell, God

Terms for table 1 Diez-Bosch and Franch in their article “In God We Trust, with God We Fight. Religion in U.S. Presidential War Rhetoric: From Johnson to Obama” as a tool to measure religiosity

In order to collect the data needed to analyze the amount of religious rhetoric in each of the speeches, the transcripts were utilized to determine the total wordcount of the speech, and how many times each president used a term from one of the three above categories. The words included in each category were counted as a part of the total for the category, rather than individually. For example, if the word “Amen” appeared it counted toward the total for the category of religious overtones rhetoric. Counts were collected by using a control search feature and manually tallying the number of times the president said one of terms in the speech<sup>4</sup>. Table two, presented below, includes the total counts per category in each of the former president’s inaugural addresses.

<sup>4</sup> Due to the manual style of data collection, there is expected to be slight human error in the raw counts for religious terms.

**Table 2:** Religious Rhetoric Present in Inaugural Addresses by Eisenhower, Reagan, and George W. Bush

	Eisenhower 1953	Eisenhower 1957	Reagan 1981	Reagan 1985	Bush 2001	Bush 2005
Spirituality Based Rhetoric	48	30	16	29	11	53
Christian Specific Rhetoric	5	1	5	9	3	4
Religious Overtones Rhetoric	16	2	5	8	6	4

The table above gives the counts for each time one of the president's said a term included in the categories, spirituality-based rhetoric, religious overtones rhetoric, or Christian specific rhetoric. As expected, the category with the most broad and inclusive set of terms, spirituality-based rhetoric had the highest counts across the board. Eisenhower's inaugural addresses were found to include the highest count of spiritual language, totaling 78 terms spoken between his two inaugural addresses, with Bush following at 64, and Reagan at 45 terms between each of their two inaugural addresses. The second category, religious overtones rhetoric, saw Eisenhower once again totaling the highest raw count for terms with 18 religious based words, followed by Reagan this time with thirteen and Bush with just ten. It then comes as a surprise for the final category, Christian specific rhetoric, that Reagan tallied the highest count, using specifically Christian words fourteen times, followed by Bush with seven, and Eisenhower with the fewest words in this category at just six.

**Table 3:** Religious Rhetoric Present in State of the Union Addresses Given Throughout their Presidencies by Eisenhower, Reagan, and George W. Bush

	Eisenhower	Reagan	Bush
Spirituality Based Rhetoric	407	239	233
Christian Specific Rhetoric	7	32	20
Religious Overtones Rhetoric	28	33	36
Total of Religious Rhetoric	442	304	289

Table three takes the total count of religious terms in each of the three former president's State of the Union addresses. This table compiled the total counts for each category from every State of the Union speech delivered during each of the president's full two terms in office. It should be noted that Eisenhower delivered two additional State of the Union addresses than Reagan and Bush. Eisenhower had transcripts for nine total State of the Union addresses, while Reagan and Bush each delivered seven. This discrepancy will be apparent in the raw counts, further tables will work to average out the volume by providing percent of religious vocabulary by total wordcounts for each speech.

The table above is also divided by category of religious rhetoric and includes the total for each of the three categories combined for each president. As expected, with his two additional speeches, Eisenhower has the highest total raw count of religious terms in his State of the Union addresses combined. Eisenhower totaled 442 religious terms used over the course of his nine

speeches, while Reagan totaled 304 terms over seven speeches, and Bush totaled 289 terms also over seven speeches. The table makes it clear, that Eisenhower's religious terms fell primarily in the spirituality-based rhetoric, more so than the Reagan and Bush who appear to give more weight to denominational terms. Both Reagan and Bush seemed relatively similar in the number of religious terms spoken during their State of the Union addresses. Reagan totaled only six more spiritual terms, twelve more Christian specific terms, and three fewer religious overtones terms than Bush. Even with two less speeches on record, Reagan used Christian specific terms more than four times as much as Eisenhower, with Reagan using 32 Christian specific terms and Eisenhower just seven. This striking difference will be examined further in discussion of how these figures speak to each President's intention behind evoking religion.

**Table 4:** Religious Rhetoric Present in Inaugural Addresses as Percentages of the Total

Wordcount

	Eisenhower 1953	Eisenhower 1957	Reagan 1981	Reagan 1985	Bush 2001	Bush 2005
Spiritually Based Rhetoric	1.96%	1.8%	.66%	1.1%	.7%	2.6%
Religious Overtone Rhetoric	.65%	.12%	.2%	.31%	.37%	.15%
Christian Specific Rhetoric	.2%	.06%	.2%	.35%	.19%	.15%
Total Wordcount of Speech	2445	1632	2428	2553	1582	2047



Focusing back on Inaugural Addresses given by each of the president's, the table above analyzes what percent religious rhetoric made up of the total wordcount for each speech. Each inaugural address is analyzed individually along the three categories. This breakdown shows the similarity for each of the president's religious rhetoric. Looking first at the spirituality category, these terms have the highest percent per speech in every address, with the two highest percentages coming from Bush's 2005 inauguration (2.6%) and Eisenhower's 1953 inauguration (1.96%). The biggest dip in use of spiritual language came from Reagan's 1981 inauguration with just .66%, a fourth of the total from Bush's 2005 address, of the speech coming from spiritual terms.

In each of the following two categories no address breaks the 1% threshold for religious terms of the total speech. The highest percentage came from Eisenhower's 1953 address in the religious overtone's speech, with .65% of the speech falling within this category, compared to just .37% for the next highest, Bush's 2007 inauguration. In the final category, focusing on Christian specific rhetoric, Reagan had the highest percent in his 1985 inaugural address with .35% of the speech qualifying as Christian rhetoric. Eisenhower had the lowest percentage under this category with just .06% of his 1957 inaugural address being Christian specific rhetoric.

**Table 5:** Religious Rhetoric Present in Dwight D. Eisenhower's State of the Union Addresses as Percentages of the Total Wordcount.

	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961
Spiritually Based Rhetoric	.52%	.63%	.73%	.53%	.92%	.98%	.85%	1.14%	1.09%
Religious Overtones Rhetoric	.08%	.05%	.17%	-	.048%	-	-	.089%	-
Christian Specific Rhetoric	-	-	.028%	.01%	-	.02%	.04%	.017%	-
Total Wordcount of Speech	6944	6013	7260	8249	4123	4902	4913	5605	6213

(For the table above, dashes represent a category in which there was no data available from the transcripts of the speeches. If there is a dash, then that speech had no terms which fell under the qualifications of rhetoric for that category.)

The table above analyzes the religious rhetoric present in Dwight D. Eisenhower's State of the Union addresses as percentages of the total wordcount for each speech. As it has been noted, Eisenhower's data is unique from the other two presidents as he had nine State of the Unions to pull from. At a glance, it is apparent that Eisenhower's most common category of religious rhetoric falls within the broad spirituality-based category, with percentages as high as 1.14% in 1960. On the other hand, for the following two categories, there were years in which the speech did not include any mention of one of the decided terms. His final address, from 1961,

is most apparent for this, having not included any terms from either the religious overtones or Christian specific category.

With gaps in data as significant as is present for Eisenhower's State of the Union Addresses, it should be contextualized with the intention behind the speech. Eisenhower's State of the Union addresses often revolved around issues of the Cold War and the fight against communist ideas. Because of this, his employed religion less as a tool for promoting specific policy proposals or idea, but rather as a means of unifying the nation against a common enemy. This intention is apparent in the broad and nondenominational terms used in his speeches. The most common term included the data used by Eisenhower, was free/freedom. This is consistent with how he would employ language to promote broad democratic ideas and condemn communist ideas at the time of his presidency.

**Table 6:** Religious Rhetoric Present in Ronald Reagan's State of the Union Addresses as Percentages of the Total Wordcount

	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
Spiritually Based Rhetoric	.54%	.56%	1.1%	1.06%	.89%	.18%	.96%
Religious Overtones Rhetoric	.077%	.035%	.22%	.023%	.17%	.05%	.02%
Christian Specific Rhetoric	.12%	.035%	.22%	.12%	.05%	.78%	.06%
Total Wordcount of Speech	5166	5575	4950	4237	3486	3808	4875

President Ronald Reagan's use of religious rhetoric as analyzed by percentages of the total wordcount for his state of the union addresses is seen in the table above. This data is quite different from Eisenhower's as he included terms in each category, with no missing data for any section. This already demonstrates an escalation in the use of rhetoric from a specific religion from Eisenhower's speeches. As with Eisenhower, Reagan's most frequently noted category was spiritually based rhetoric, with the highest percentages being in 1.1% in 1984 and 1.06% in the following year, 1985. The spike in spiritual rhetoric in 1984 is notable because of its importance as an election year. This could have inspired more universal and unifying language.

It is worthy to note that even in years where the percentage of Christian specific language was low, such as in 1983 with only .035%, the language itself was worded strongly in favor of intertwining religion and government. For instance, in the 1983 State of the Union, Reagan was quoted saying "God should never have been expelled from America's classrooms in the first place." In this he is promoting prayers and teachings of God in classrooms, a highly controversial subject which has been the source of several Supreme Court cases. One such case, occurred in 1962 in the *Engel v. Vital* case in which the court ruled it unconstitutional for a school to create and encourage the recitation in a public school. This quote further solidified Reagan's conservative stance particularly on social policy.

**Table 7:** Religious Rhetoric Present in George W. Bush's State of the Union Addresses as Percentages of the Total Wordcount

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Spiritually Based Rhetoric	.89%	.52%	.54%	.93%	.68%	.34%	.7%
Religious Overtones Rhetoric	.05%	.11%	.14%	.099%	.13%	.07%	.087%
Christian Specific Rhetoric	.077%	.074%	.058%	.02%	.037%	.05%	.07%
Total Wordcount of Speech	3910	5338	5181	5052	5316	5572	5722

President George W. Bush's use of religious rhetoric as analyzed by percentages of the total wordcount for his state of the union addresses is seen in the table above. Similar to Reagan, Bush had no missing data, meaning each of his State of the Union addresses contained terms from each of the three categories. As with each of the previous presidents, Bush's highest percentages of religious rhetoric fell under the category of spiritually based rhetoric. However, the differences between Bush's percentages are not as drastic as with the previous two. Bush's highest percent does not break 1% of the total, being just .93% of his 2005 address.

The data presented from Bush's State of the Union addresses tells an interesting story of the different perspectives from which his speeches were made. In 2002, the table shows a higher percent of spiritual rhetoric, stemming from the need to comfort and unite the nation following the attacks on September 11, 2001. Then in 2004, what would have been an election year, the category in religious rhetoric is at his highest, most likely to appeal to his evangelical voter base.

His use of Christianity to appeal to his audience can be seen in the quote, “I believe that God has planted in every human heart the desire to live in freedom.” His use of specifically Christian also increased toward the end of his presidency, with the content of the speeches clearly relying on Christian values, for example, in 2006 Bush said, “Human life is a gift from our Creator - and that gift should never be discarded, devalued, or put up for sale.”

### **Conclusion**

This research sought to analyze how the individual goals and political intentions of presidents would be reflected in their speeches addressing the public. As the data presented, subtle changes in the usage of differing types of religious rhetoric serve as a useful analysis to the president’s intention for the speech. With Inaugural addresses, far less Christian specific rhetoric was present, as these speeches are aimed toward unifying the nation under a new head of state. In order to do so, across all three presidents, there was a much higher use of spiritual rhetoric which included terms such as “free/freedom, liberty, and peace.” Each of these hint at broader themes of democratic beliefs, a concept at the center of attention during transitions of power such as inaugurations.

Where truly individual differences began to emerge was in the data from each of the three president’s state of the union addresses. With these speeches, while still addressing the nation as a whole, a president has more autonomy to discuss issues pertaining to their platforms or domestic and foreign affairs of the time. Eisenhower’s state of the unions for example, strayed away from specifically Christian rhetoric due to the global political climate of his time. With the looming threat of the Cold War and the infiltration of communist ideas into American political thought, it was more pertinent to him to emphasize unity and democracy. His intent was

confirmed through correspondences with Reverend Billy Graham. Their belief that religion, if kept universal, could strengthen the American people's resolve against communism.

By the time Reagan took office two decades later, the threat of the Cold War was less pressing, and his focus was on domestic policies, especially those involving moral arguments. It was discussed how the polarization of the nation after social issues like abortion and gay rights had been brought to the forefront in the years leading to his election. Aware of the growing voice of conservatives Christians and the Moral Majority as possible bases of support, Reagan's state of the union addresses leans more heavily into religious and specifically Christian rhetoric. This is especially true in election years. The data showed increases in Reagan's use of Christian rhetoric in the year 1984 and decreases in the years to follow, when the need for appealing to a voter base was no longer necessary. This is confirmed with the lowest percentages in the final years, 1987 and 1988, at the end of his presidency.

When looking into Reagan's personal relationship with religion, it was clear it did not hold as prominent of a position in his life as it did for the other two presidents. Reagan's laissez faire relationship with religion plays out in how he employs religious language. It was his close relations with Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. It was for this reason, not his true displays of religion, which helped him reshape how the mass population viewed how involved the presidency could become with religion.

George W. Bush similarly to Eisenhower, at the start of his presidency employed primarily non-denominational and more spiritual language as a means of unifying a nation against a common enemy. His presidency began with the declaration of a War on Terror and what followed in his 2002 state of the union address was an emphasis on unification and

democracy. As his presidency continued, he displayed a consistent use of both broadly religious and specifically Christian language.

While both Eisenhower and Bush demonstrated a much closer and more personal relationship with religion, it was interesting to find that it was Reagan and Bush who publicly declared their personal sentiments for Christian views through the religious rhetoric of their presidential speeches. It can then be inferred that it is not the personal relation to religion which inspires public figures to discuss it openly, but rather the political context with which they choose to do so.

In further research, it would be of interest to examine presidents on the other end of the ideological spectrum, who may demonstrate more liberal views. Examples may include John F. Kennedy, for he was the first non-protestant president and like Eisenhower was under a global conflict against communism. Another may be Jimmy Carter, a devout religious Democrat who would contradict Reagan's relationship with religion. Finally, Barack Obama would present an interesting view on how the War on Terror inspired religious speech under a Democrat administration. In addition to analyzing how presidents of differing political ideology may utilize religious speech, delving deeper into the use of religious rhetoric in other areas of political influence would be worth examining.

While this study specifically analyzed state of the union and inaugural addresses, looking into other speeches as delivered by presidents both while in office and on the campaign trail could be examined for how religious speech varies depending on the anticipated audience. For example, asking the question would religious rhetoric be more frequent in campaign rally speeches or advertisements such as election flyers or commercials may produce notable results. These results may differ from if a study examined how presidents incorporate religion at more



formal events, attended by colleagues and other political elite. Another route of analysis could be through the analyzation of legislation signed into law under a specific administration. Legislation could be examined not only for the religious rhetoric contained with them, but also for the correlation this may have to partisan policies. The connection of religion to politics in the U.S. has many possible facets of exploration for research in attempts to conceptualize how religion is used as a political device.

Despite foundational ideologies of the United States involving a separation of church and state. What has been shown is a perseverance of religion in the political dialogue. This has been furthered by the political elite, who are able to directly influence the American people. By looking into presidents who share a political party and the experience of serving two terms, the research was better able to analyze how presidents as individual's rather than extensions of their political party, use religion in their addresses to the American people to further intertwine the relationship between religion and American politics.

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